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During the first half of 2015, the European Union found itself under siege after a dramatic increase in the numbers of asylum seekers. There is no denying that Europe is facing a humanitarian crisis of unprecedented proportions thanks to increasing waves of illegal migrants crossing the Mediterranean and moving up through the Balkans.

Across the English Channel, the French Coquelles Eurotunnel terminal has become a hotspot for migrant incursions, leading to severe disruption to train services between Britain and France. At its peak every night there were up to 2,000 attempts to board lorries or trains. This activity inevitably has an economic impact that is detrimental on both sides of the Channel. Nonetheless, the perception that the UK is the end of the European refugee trail is wholly erroneous.

While the British media has focused on the threat posed by refugees trying illegally to enter the UK via Calais, the scale of the problem pales into insignificance in comparison to that faced by the rest of Europe. In particular, those fleeing the world's conflict zones are putting increasing pressure on Italy, Turkey, Greece and the neighbouring Balkan states.

Macedonia has been described as the "nexus" of the migration route from Turkey and, as a result, finds itself at loggerheads with neighbouring Greece and Serbia. At the same time, Hungary and Germany have become the largest recipients of asylum seekers within the European Union. In desperation, Hungary announced it would construct a border fence with Serbia, while Greece has been ferrying refugees about the Aegean to alleviate the pressure on the Greek islands.

Poverty stricken Greece is now the main entry point for refugees entering Europe, surpassing Italy (over 170,000 migrants arrived in Italy in 2014, the largest number into one country in EU history). Illegal immigration into Europe has long been a controversial issue, but in recent years the problem has been greatly exacerbated by the conflicts in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Syria and Yemen. In the first quarter of 2015 the EU received 184,400 applications for asylum representing a huge 86 per cent increase. Efforts by the EU to deal with the so-called "Balkan" and "Mediterranean" migrant/refugee routes have seemingly come to nothing.

The massive problem faced by the EU authorities is separating genuine refugees fleeing war zones from those who are simply illegal economic migrants, or worse traffickers, criminals or terrorists. The greatest threat posed by mass migration is not so much from radical Islamic terror groups, such as Islamic State, but

from organised crime seeking to prey on the people they are trafficking. The despicable exploitation of female refugees forced by traffickers into prostitution across Europe is well documented.

The UK Border Force has flagged a threat from trafficking gangs who are seeking to smuggle migrants into Britain with criminal intent. Some are forced by the traffickers to "work" off the cost of their passage. Certainly on the Greek-Serbian border the "Ali Babas" (thieves) have been preying mercilessly on the helpless migrants. Serbian gangsters who profited from the break-up of Yugoslavia in the 1990s are believed to be a key component of the human trafficking gangs.

In addition, the growing influx of migrants is also fuelling the perceived grievances of the European far right groups. Germany in the first half of the year suffered almost as many far right crimes against refugee accommodation as in all of 2014. According to the German Interior Ministry, of the 173 crimes reported 19 were violent – including the bombing of a left wing politician's car in the city of Dresden.

Understandably people are fleeing the ongoing conflicts in the Middle East. The failed states of Iraq, Somalia, Syria and Yemen have little to offer their populations, and the rise of Islamic hardliners has forced many moderate Muslims to flee their homes. The seven-month-old conflict in Yemen has, according to Oxfam, brought half the country's 13 million population to the point of starvation. The latest bout of fighting started at the end of March when a Saudi-led coalition launched an air campaign in support of a Sunni militia fighting the northern Shia Houthi rebels.

Further west, in Syria, President Assad's forces reportedly control just one sixth of the country. Syrian Arabs and Kurds have been fleeing the fighting between the regime's beleaguered armed forces and the various opposition groups. Almost eight million Syrians are now internally homeless. Any hopes that Assad's troops might counter the forces of Islamic State which straddle the Syrian-Iraqi border are long gone. Reportedly the Syrian Army numbers about 150,000, down from its pre-war strength of double that. To many desperate Syrians, Europe offers the hope of a better life.

President Recep Tayyip Erdogan of neighbouring Turkey wants to push the Syrian civil war away from their mutual border. The violence has already spilled over into Turkey, which is host to almost two million Syrian refugees (Lebanon also has more than a million). The Turkish response to this, with US agreement, is to create a security buffer zone inside Syria to provide a safe haven for displaced Syrians.



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Porous borders: migrants cross the border from Serbia into Hungary as they attempt to reach the European Union

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Turkey's stance is that the refugees not only pose a threat to Turkish national security, but that they could also kindle the resurgence of Kurdish nationalism within Turkey and Syria.

Ankara's position is that Turkey's Kurdish PKK, Syria's Kurdish YPG and Islamic State are all terrorist organisations that cannot be tolerated. Nonetheless, Turkish troops moving into northern Syria are unlikely to alleviate the refugee problem. If anything, they are likely to cause more people to flee war-torn Syria, as are ongoing Turkish military operations against the Kurds.

To the west of Turkey, the Greeks are struggling to cope with a tide of people, amounting to some 158,000 during the first half of 2015 (during the same period 90,000 arrived in Italy by sea). In July alone, migrant and refugee arrivals in Greece totalled 50,000, outstripping the number for the whole of 2014. Processing and screening these people is a massive but necessary task. Verifying their back-stories is undoubtedly a challenge, but one that the Greek authorities should be taking very seriously.

The Greek tourist industry has been teetering in the face of the country's enormous national debt; it

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is now hampered by tens of thousands of refugees pitching up in the Greek tourist islands off the Turkish coast in the Aegean and Dodecanese. For example, Kos found itself host to 5,000 refugees earlier this year. To ease the pressure, the Greek government chartered a cruise liner to ferry 2,500 Syrian refugees (1,300 from Kos and 1,200 from Kalymnos, Leros and Lesvos) to the port of Piraeus west of Athens.

Greece's Balkan neighbours are alarmed that such moves simply hasten the arrival of refugees on their borders. Macedonia's decision to close its border came as the cruise ship docked in Piraeus. Originally the vessel had been scheduled to take them to Thessaloniki near the border, but was rerouted after the Macedonian announcement was made.

From Greece, refugees are passing through Macedonia, Serbia and Hungary to reach Austria and Germany. By the summer the Balkans were experiencing a fivefold increase in refugees coming from Greece. In the space of a month, some 39,000 people (reportedly largely from Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria) moved north from Greece through Macedonia. From the Macedonian border town of Gevgelija, refugees are taking the train to Kumanovo on the Serbian border.

In June, in desperation, Greece and Macedonia agreed to provide refugees who had crossed their borders illegally with papers allowing them three days to transit their territory. The Macedonian government, appalled at migrants being killed by trains, suffering from dehydration and heat stroke as well as being robbed, passed a law allowing them to travel freely on the train northwards. The situation on the Macedonian-Greek border became so tense that the Macedonian government declared a state of emergency and called in the army. Following this, Macedonian riot police fought to contain 3,000 people trapped in no man's land between the two countries.

Hungary has seen a 13-fold increase in the number of asylum seekers, placing it second after Germany. So far this year Hungary has had 38,000 asylum seekers. The Hungarian government announced that it is fencing its 175km border with Serbia to keep the migrants out. A temporary 110km razor wire fence had been completed by the end of August. This has proved ineffective where it is not policed as refugees are simply climbing through it.

Many of those who succeed in crossing the Hungarian border head northwest to Austria and then Germany. Germany estimates that it will be facing 800,000 asylum seekers this year up from 450,000 last year. The German border town of Passau, which lies west of the Austrian city of Linz, is the main transit point into Germany. From there refugees are processed and moved to regional reception centres. To compound matters, Germany experienced its highest birth rate since 2002 last year, with 715,000 registered births (the country's population is anticipated to fall from 80 million to 65 million by 2060). Beyond Germany,



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the migrants have been heading for Sweden or the Netherlands. By comparison, just a trickle have been reaching Calais.

The European Commission wants to redistribute the migrants landing in Italy and Greece across the EU on an equitable basis. However, none of the 28 member states are keen on quotas being imposed on them. Members argue this does not take into account existing asylum seeker numbers or current economic conditions that will hamper their integration. France and Germany declined to take over 30 per cent of the refugees to be relocated. The French firstly want illegal economic migrants to be distinguished from those fleeing persecution who qualify as genuine asylum seekers. Under EU law Britain, Ireland and Denmark are exempt from such a scheme adding further to a sense of unfairness.

In the meantime, the British government has been grappling with up to 5,000 refugees at Calais who have been seeking to get into the UK. The British Home Secretary is working with the French to resolve the problem by committing upwards of £30m. Most notable is a 2km long, 4m high fence which has gone up at Coquelles around the Eurotunnel freight and vehicle terminal. This has reduced the number of attempted boardings to 200 a night. The worry is that, with tighter security at Calais, the human traffickers will move their operations to Dunkirk, the Belgian port of Zeebrugge or the Dutch Hook of Holland which all have regular ferry services to the UK.

The lack of resolution to the world's trouble spots makes it hard to foresee any let up in this tragic human exodus seeking security and a better life in Europe. What is clear is that the lack of EU consensus on how to handle the situation will continue to undermine relations between some member states. It is also evident that the Balkan refugee route is a potential flashpoint that will need to be managed with tact and diplomacy if there is not to be further violence.

Hungarian authorities have struggled to cope with the huge influx of migrants attempting to enter the EU from the Balkans

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